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McClatchy Newspapers

US Tries to Undercut Taliban at Tribal Level

By Thomas L. Day

2/5/2010

US and Afghan officials try to persuade some of the 350 tribal leaders in Afghanistan to cooperate against the Taliban. It's not an easy task.

Paktia Province - US officials put a lot of hope last year in Haji Rashid, an up-and-coming community leader in the Zormat district of Afghanistan's Paktia province. They considered Rashid a unifying figure who was capable of bringing together about a dozen tribes in the area to work in support of the American-backed Afghan government.

Their hopes collapsed, however, when Rashid was kidnapped, tortured, mutilated and murdered and his groundwork to broker the support of the tribes in Zormat quickly foundered.

Military officials aren't sure who killed Rashid, but their suspicions point to the Taliban. "It's to their benefit to have instability," said Lt. Col. Matthew Smith, a Georgia Army National Guard officer and the commander of about 1,000 U.S. troops in Paktia province.

Rashid's murder illustrates one of the obstacles that American officials and military commanders face as they try to persuade tribal leaders to cooperate with U.S. troops and with one another against the Taliban. Afghanistan's historically weak central governments have shared power with the country's five so-called "super tribes" and the tribes that compose them, with 350 or so sub-tribes and with local clans, and most of the country's would-be conquerors including the British and the Soviets have employed their own tribal strategies.

Now American officials are attending tribal meetings, staying in close touch with tribal leaders and trying to determine which leaders are friendly and which aren't.

In Zormat, U.S. and Afghan officials have turned to tribal leaders as a channel of communication with several small Taliban networks in the region, networks they think could be persuaded to join a peaceful political process. American commanders declined to identify the Taliban commanders with whom they've been communicating. Navigating tribal rivalries

Those efforts, however, risk feeding traditional tribal rivalries, to the detriment of any plan to undercut the Taliban.

"If you are seen as favoring one tribe over another, you are seen as an enemy to them," said 1st Sgt. Troy Arrowsmith of Odgen, Utah, the top enlisted soldier on the Paktia Provisional Reconstruction Team, a cooperative of about 100 troops and civilians from multiple US agencies.

Unhappy tribes don't have to look far to find outside support.

"In Zormat, the tribes are fractured, and the Taliban are a part of those tribes," Arrowsmith said. "They live with them. They have families there."

American commanders in Paktia keep maps of the province, closely demarcating the tribal areas.

Rivalries among tribes, sub-tribes and families aren't confined to Zormat.

In Paktia's northeast, there's a long-standing animus between the Turi, a Shiite Muslim tribe that extends into Pakistan, and the Bushara, a Sunni Muslim tribe. US officials think the tribes have been at odds over territorial boundaries for about 60 years.

The Bushara "claim that they won't allow them to move freely; the Turi claim that they get threatened when go to Gardez," said Genevieve Libonati, a State Department official who's assigned to Paktia.

Tribal meeting with US guests

The chaotic nature of tribal relations was on display on a recent Sunday, when a panoply of American military, diplomatic and Department of Agriculture officials joined about 100 government and tribal leaders from the region for a "shura," or meeting, near the Pakistani border.

After introductions, no U.S. officials spoke during the shura. They only listened.

What they heard was a cacophony of complaints. As emotions rose, any formalities guiding the shura were quickly abandoned. The only common issue among the tribal leaders involved the failings of the American occupiers.

"I'm glad the PRT commander is here," one Afghan participant told the other tribal leaders, referring to Lt. Col. Carlos Halcomb. "They were going to build a hospital in our district, and it hasn't been provided yet."

The comment brought an uproar of support and dissent.

"If we don't have good security in the area, we're not going to be able to finish the projects," retorted Abdul Rahman Mangal, the deputy governor of Paktia.

For several hours, tribal leaders shouted their concerns, with no one attempting to regulate who had the floor. One continued a harangue even after he'd left the lectern, directly in front of the provincial deputy governor and the US officials seated in the back of the room.

Finally, the local director of the Afghan Intelligence Service approached the lectern and calmly delivered a clear message to the tribal chiefs: "Don't assist (the Taliban). Don't let them stay in your home overnight. Don't give them food. Just tell them to leave."

Turning away the Taliban isn't easy, though, particularly in areas that Taliban fighters call home. American officials think the Taliban even have infiltrated some local political meetings denouncing the U.S. occupation and threatened other tribal leaders who attend these shuras.

"Have I been to a shura where there was Taliban infiltration? I'm pretty sure I have," said 1st Lt. Luis Alberto Moreno, a US civil affairs officer who specializes in tribal relations in the border region.